Syllabus
UCLA - Econ 19 - Fall 2018
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Main Information


Moodle Website: https://moodle2.sscnet.ucla.edu/course/view/18F-ECON19-1

Course description. Tim Cook, Marissa Mayer, Bradley Cooper, Angelina Jolie, Tiger Woods and Katy Perry all earned more than 10 million dollars last year according to Forbes. That is more than 300 times the median wage in the United States. Can economics make sense of these orders of magnitudes? Who among a famous singer, a CEO running an international organization on several continents, an entrepreneur creating Microsoft, Apple or Facebook, or a successful Wall Street trader, creates more “economic value”? Should inventors, top managers and CEOs be rewarded more than rock stars or professional athletes? What are the arguments for and against counteracting the corresponding increases in inequalities through taxation or other government interventions? Can we expect the rising “winner-takes-all” trend to continue? The Fiat Lux class Economics of Superstars should be a playful way to first approach basic economic concepts (optimality, incentives, Pareto distributions, public goods, complementarities, etc.), and to test the power of economic reasoning as well as its limits.

Grading. P/NP basis, based on attendance and 30 mn presentations by groups of 2 or 3, during the last two sessions (Week 7 and Week 9). To pass this class, you are required to come to all five classes from beginning to end (per university regulation, because our classes are 2-hour classes). Please make sure you can make all five dates before you enroll in this class.

Readings

Required readings before classes start. Sherwin Rosen (1938-2001), whom the title of this course is borrowed from, wrote about superstars in The American Scholar in 1983, following his celebrated American Economic Review paper in 1981 (listed under “To go further”). You are required to read this piece before classes start:


Main Readings. The material for presentations during the last 2 classes can be found in the following eight academic articles. These are articles from the Journal of Economic Perspectives, in complimentary access from the American Economic Association’s website. They will be assigned on a first come, first served basis. Please email me the number of the paper you wish to present, as well as the name of your partner(s):


To go further (Optional). My goal will be to try to convey economic intuitions with the minimum amount of mathematical formalism. However, you may want to try reading the corresponding academic articles yourself. They are very often very mathematical, and I certainly do not expect you to understand their technical derivations. But the introductions and conclusions usually translate the mathematics into words, and can actually be fascinating to read. For example, I advise you to read Sherwin Rosen’s introduction to his AER article The Economics of Superstars. (it is the first reference below) You should also find Handbook chapters and to a lesser extent, the Annual Review of Economics, way more accessible. Again, clicking on the titles should redirect you directly to a download page. Should the links be dead, the articles are also available from a computer connected to the UCLA Wifi, for example through Jstor http://www.jstor.org/ or directly on Google Scholar https://scholar.google.com/:


Books (Optional). To go further, you may want to read the following related references:


Lighter Reading. The following pieces are written by academic economists for a broader audience:

• Land of Hope and Dreams: Rock and Roll, Economics, and Rebuilding the Middle Class. Alan B. Krueger (Chairman, Council of Economic Advisers). Link
• Trade and Inequality, Revisited. Paul Krugman, Vox EU. Link

Press articles. The rise in top incomes is very much in the news these days. Here is a choice of press articles on the subject:

• How Superstars’ Pay Stifles Everyone Else. Eduardo Porter, NY Times. Link
• Forces of Divergence. John Cassidy, New Yorker. Link
• The Programmer’s Price. Lizzie Widdicombe, New Yorker. Link